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THE UNITARIANS.

BY

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BOSTON.

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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

B. H.

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THE UNITARIANS.*

THE position of the Unitarian Church in America is, from the nature of the case, wholly different from that of any other communion. For the Unitarian Church brings together people who have agreed that they will not enforce any formal statement of religion. They do not understand that any intellectual formula is necessary to bring about that larger life which the Saviour called "the coming of the Kingdom of God." They trust implicitly and absolutely in that presence with us to-day of God himself, which all Christian communions assert in words. It follows that the greater part of the Unitarians of the country are connected with churches not in the Unitarian organization. They are comparatively indifferent as to what the minister says in his sermon, or as to what the creed of the particular organization affects.

The business of the Unitarian Church is to unite all children of God for the bringing in of His Kingdom. In this business they do not speak even of the saving of separate souls as the first necessity, though of course it follows immediately on loyal effort for the common good.

As persons of profound Unitarian convictions might be found in almost every religious assembly in America, it is impossible to make any statistical statement of their power in the religious life of America. All sermons which are

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called practical, as distinct from dogmatic or doctrinal preaching, are Unitarian sermons. All sermons which impress what Scougal called "the life of God in the soul of man" are Unitarian sermons. All sermons which point out the way in which the Kingdom of God can be advanced in the world are Unitarian sermons. And this is so, whether they are preached from a Roman Catholic pulpit or are the unpremeditated utterances of a Quaker meeting.

But the object of these papers is to show what is now the visible work of the organizations which meet the public eye in America in different departments of ecclesiastical activity. I will not attempt, therefore, any guess as to the work done by Unitarian literature and the principles it expresses in churches called Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian. I will only say that that work is very large.

The great Unitarian leaders of this century have been William Ellery Channing, James Martineau, and Theodore Parker. It is certain that, in the wide circulation of their books, many more copies are now read in the theological schools of Orthodox communions than in all the parsonages of all the Unitarian ministry.

When Dean Stanley went back from America to England, in 1881, he said that he had taken every opportunity to hear the best preaching of the American Evangelical churches of different communions, and that it made no difference whom he heard, for Mr. Emerson was always the preacher. Mr. Emerson, born in the Unitarian Church, and for several years in its active ministry, was all his life urging the Unitarian principle of the absolute immanence of God. It is this which makes him the great religious apostle of America to-day, whether the preacher be Dr. Swing, of Chicago, or Mr. Moody, in New England, or any one between.

The organized Unitarian Church of America accepted that name some seventy years ago in New England. Historically, its visible organization dates from that period. It has been observed that Independency, whether in Hungary, in Switzerland, in England, in France, in Holland, or in America, has inevitably tended to freedom or Liberalism in religion. One cannot make much of such texts as "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," and at the same time keep people bound for generations to a written formula like the Athanasian Creed or the Westminster Confession.

In the case of New England, the Independency was from the first radical. At the very beginning, it was impossible for any separate church to agree on a creed for itself, and for a hundred years of "fierce democracy" they hardly attempted it. In the early Puritan churches men simply covenanted to "walk together" as followers of Christ, by whatever light might be revealed to them. Who or what Christ was, or how the light might come, they did not attempt to say on paper. They probably knew that no two of them would agree in the same statement.

The churches also gave to their laymen a much larger share in matters of conscience or religion than other churches had dared. So it happened that by a steady growth the strict Calvinism of the Puritan leaders often gave place to a very broad Arminian theology, which proclaimed, as the Methodist hymn says:—

" Salvation's free for you and me ;
I'm glad salvation's free !"

Predestination or foreordination was absolutely thrown over. Of course, all the five points of Calvin went in the same parcel with it. When in 1745 Whitfield, with his Calvinistic prejudices, started what is known as "the great

revival" in New England, a distinct protest, which was at the time called "Arminian," made it clear that a very large part of the people of New England, and of course of their churches, had rejected the Calvinistic theology.

In the second decade of this century, the Calvinistic preachers of Massachusetts tried again to state in form the stiff doctrines of the Westminster Confession. It was at this time that the Congregational churches of Massachusetts — never united in any strong organism — parted, and became two bodies, which have since found but few points for co-operation.

In Massachusetts we speak of the "Orthodox churches" and of the "Liberal churches" to designate those who retain Calvinistic creeds, and those which do not. In 1826 most of the leaders of the "Liberal" side formed the American Unitarian Association as a missionary body for the extension of "pure Christianity." But this was an association of individuals. The churches themselves, defiant in their Independency and very shy of anything which should savor of Presbyterian or Episcopal control, made no formal organization, until they were fairly compelled to it.

But at last, at the end of the civil war, in a convention which was sitting in New York on the very day when Grant entered Richmond, three hundred of the Unitarian churches formed "The National Conference of Unitarian and other Christian churches of America." They state the historical truth that they are impelled to this union by the great opportunities and demands for Christian work and consecration. But they have steadily refused to make any written formula which can be called a creed by which to define the opinions of the Churches united.

At the first meeting of this Conference it made a suggestion, which amounted to a direction, for the formation

of local conferences in different parts of the country. There now exist twenty-six of these conferences. They are the Southern Conference, the Pacific Conference, the Unitarian Conference of the Middle States and Canada, the Connecticut Valley Conference, the Channing Conference of Rhode Island and the neighborhood, the Maine, New Hampshire, Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota Conferences, the Rocky Mountain Conference, and nine County Conferences in Massachusetts.

The largest of these Conferences maintain "missionary agents," to whom is entrusted the work which in Episcopal bodies would be given to Missionary Bishops. But that name is not used in any of the Unitarian communions, excepting in the Hungarian Church.

Until within ten or twenty years the principal duty of the American Unitarian Association, which has been accepted by the National Conference as its executive agent, was the publication of Unitarian books. The present generation of Americans, fortunately, does not know how severe was the censorship which ecclesiastical orthodoxy then kept upon the press of America. Publishers were afraid to be responsible for books which were called radical. Thus Miss Edgeworth's "Sequel to Frank" was first published by the Unitarian Book Fund, because no American publisher chose to take the risk of publishing any book from a writer so unevangelical. It was the chief business, therefore, of the Unitarian Association, for the first forty years of its existence, to print books which would not be printed otherwise.

All this is now changed. The more radical a book is, the better for the "trade." The Unitarian Association now publishes occasional tracts on "Pure Christianity," for the use of its missionaries; but for the most part, it leaves the publication of books, whether of criticism,

of instruction, or of edification, to the regular business houses engaged in publishing.

What follows is that books discussing religious and ecclesiastical subjects with absolute freedom go everywhere into quarters where they could never be pushed, even with the proselyting zeal of a denominational board. It has been the policy of the Evangelical pulpit, in more instances than worldly wisdom would have suggested, to warn its hearers not to be tempted by the alluring baits offered them in heterodox writings. This word of warning is a very wide advertisement of such literature. And it has often proved that in cities or towns where the heterodox people had not united in any church order—under dread, indeed, of the restrictions imposed by any ecclesiastical forms, however slight—the demand, through the booksellers, of latitudinarian literature has been larger than that of cities where such a demand was supplied, to a certain extent, by the proclamation made, at least once a week, by a free pulpit.

Relieved from the necessity of publishing books, the American Unitarian Association devotes itself more widely than formerly to the establishment of new churches in different parts of the United States. So small is the Unitarian Church as an organized communion, that the number of new churches seems insignificant almost, in comparison, for instance, with the enlargement of the number of Methodist churches, which is said to be two a day.

The Unitarian Association is able, however, to establish new churches quite as fast as it finds competent ministers. The Unitarian body has always been very critical in its judgment of its ministry, and probably always will be. In the supply of new pulpits, and filling the places of ministers who die or retire, the Unitarian Church needs every year at least fifty men.

Perhaps one-half of these come to it from its own churches or theological schools; one-half, perhaps, from the Evangelical pulpits. Gentlemen who find the restrictions of old creeds irksome, discover — to their surprise, perhaps — that close at their side is a respectable Church which asks for no formula from any preacher. It simply gives him an honorable chance to work in bringing in the Kingdom of God. Once engaged in that work, he is judged — as everything else is judged — by his fruits.

It will surprise some readers in the Evangelical communion when I say it, but it is true, that I do not know the opinions on many interesting points of Christian theology of gentlemen with whom I have been closely associated in a Unitarian ministry of forty years. I have no occasion to know. I see how far they succeed in their Christian work and how far they fail. But, unless we meet personally for conversation, or unless I hear their preaching, which does not often happen, I cannot judge of their dogmatic opinion from the fact that they occupy a Unitarian pulpit.

Of thirty-five new Unitarian churches established in the last eighteen or twenty months, five are in the Pacific States, ten are in New England, two in the Dominion of Canada, and the rest in the Middle and Northern States, with one in the South. They are generally formed by the coming together of intelligent religious persons, in some large town, who from early education or from a recent change of conviction cannot bear the restrictions, whether of ritual or of doctrine, of the creed-bound Churches.

To these persons it has sometimes happened that people of no religion have joined themselves, from curiosity, or from the desire to annoy or injure “the old line.” But the Unitarian Church is not, in its nature, controversial or aggressive. It would have enlarged more visibly, had

not its ministers, on the whole, hated controversy. Their business, as has been said, is to bring in the Kingdom of God, and to bring it in by uniting men as far as they can.

As I read the history, their name was given them from their love of union, as long ago as the middle of the sixteenth century. As the Unitarian Church makes great account of character, having, indeed, no other visible test of its members, and being obliged to judge them by their fruits, as there is nothing else to judge them by, persons of loose or profligate life have no reason for joining it and no temptation to remain in it after they have joined.

It will often happen, therefore, that the only formula by which a Unitarian church can be described is that which the poet Rogers, who was himself an eager Unitarian, gave to his Church: "It believes," he said, "in one God, no devil, and twenty shillings to the pound."

The Unitarian Church of America, in connection with the sister Church in England, maintains a Unitarian Mission in Japan.

As in all other Churches, the people interested in the Unitarian Church to-day feel the necessity of making it a working Church. "The church is not to be a mere lecture-room." This is said everywhere in one form or another. The statement is very widely made in the constitutions of different congregations that they are organized "for worship, for education, for hospitality, and for charity." And many of the churches have committees and officers annually designated for each of these affairs. They seek to relieve the Church of Christ from the charge often made against it, that in its eagerness to save souls and to worship God, it has no organization for humanity.

To carry forward the business of education, the Unitarian Church, like all the other Churches, relies largely on its Sunday-schools. To provide for the general needs, it has a central Sunday-school Society, of which the office is in

25 Beacon Street, Boston, in the same building with the Boston offices of the Unitarian Association. This society publishes most of the text-books used in the Sunday-schools, imports and keeps for sale maps, prints, and other articles of Sunday-school equipment, and publishes a journal for Sunday-schools called *Every Other Sunday*. It maintains every winter a course of lectures for teachers, and it is the duty of its officers to keep up such a correspondence with the schools through the country as shall be of use to all.

In the separate churches there is a general organization of clubs under the name of "Unity Clubs," or some other name which is catholic enough to welcome all intelligent persons who wish to engage in study. The range of reading and work done in these clubs extend far beyond what would be called ecclesiastical or theological. They study history, or natural history, or philosophy in other lines, or most often, some specific literary subject which has been assigned for the year. In some cases these clubs also act as charity organizations in the philanthropic work of their churches. The Unitarians are very coy, or shy, in establishing what would be called denominational schools. As their creed is not to have a creed, they are averse to founding schools with the view of prejudicing people in favor of any special form of religious statement. They insist, in their church organizations and out of them, that the education of the people shall not be conducted with sectarian bias.

In certain instances, however, they have established boarding-schools, with special reference to the education of their own children, providing that there shall be no denominational pressure brought to bear upon the pupil. Such schools are Proctor Academy for boys in New Hampshire, Prospect Hill School and Howard Institute for girls in Massachusetts.

For the training of their ministers they have a Divinity School at Cambridge, another in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and they are about to establish a third in California. But, true to the principle just now laid down, no creed of any sort is exacted of the students in either of these schools. The Cambridge school is so well equipped, and so broad in its arrangements, that it draws in many pupils from men now at work in the Evangelical ministry, and intending to return to it. It has six professors, of whom two are Baptists, one of the orthodox side of Congregationalism, and three Unitarians.

This school has the immense advantage, not properly understood through the country, that any one of its students may attend any one of the courses of instruction carried on by any one of the one hundred and twenty teachers in Harvard University. This is, indeed, the only place of education known to me, excepting Johns Hopkins University, where the higher questions of philosophy and of social order of our time are in any sort — I do not say adequately — provided for.

The Theological School at Meadville, in Pennsylvania, is respectably endowed, with four resident professors, and several others who lecture from time to time. In theory, this school was to provide preachers for what was "the West" in the days when it was founded. In practice, it has often proved that the gentlemen educated there determined to follow their career on the eastern coast of America or in England; and what was more, that the congregations in those parts liked to hear them and called them.

On the other hand, and not unnaturally, gentlemen who have been trained in the "cloister life" of an Eastern college have been glad to go West and enjoy the luxury of a new-born civilization. Such men are Dr. Stebbins, of San Francisco, and Dr. Thomas Eliot, of Oregon. Yet, again, some of the most efficient preachers in the Uni-

tarian Church were educated in "the larger college of the world," and never had the advantages or disadvantages of a systematic professional school. Such men have been Dr. William Ellery Channing, Edward Everett, George Bancroft, the late William P. Tilden, and Robert Collyer, of New York.

Among the methods of education adopted by the Unitarian Church is an interesting use of modern methods, which is called the "Post-office Mission." In almost every large church there is a club of stay-at-home missionaries who do their work by mail. A club begins by taking a State for its own, say Minnesota or Idaho. In the newspapers of that State the club advertises that any person who is interested in Unitarian or other Liberal religious literature may address the secretary of the club, and will receive books, pamphlets, magazines, or newspapers in that line. It always proves that there is a large number of persons, perhaps in very small towns, who have heard of this heresy, but have not been able to obtain information upon it.

A well-organized club soon finds itself in correspondence with a large number of persons, perhaps several hundred, in the State which it has selected for its mission field. This correspondence often ripens into one of personal intimacy. It will happen that people write as they write to an old minister, or to a doctor who has been of service to them in other times. Out of such correspondences have come the volunteering of men of spirit for the ministry; also there has grown up the establishment of local libraries; and the post-office correspondence people often point to particular churches which have been founded as the evident result of their intelligent and energetic correspondence.

There is nothing known to me in the organization of the Unitarian Church in which the arrangements for the

hospitable welcome of strangers in a town are different from those of any other ecclesiastical body. It seems to us at the East that such enterprises are carried on with more cordiality and more skill in our Western cities than in our staid habits of an "effete civilization." But of this others may judge better than I can.

Under the general head of charity in the organization of the churches is included all "the organization of the church for humanity," if I may take the phrase of a distinguished Methodist clergyman. On this side the Unitarian Church ought to be at its best. For it exists simply for nothing but bringing in the Kingdom of God; and if it is not at work in that, it had better not be at all.

From the very beginning, therefore, its most active members have been more interested in what people call humanitarian work — by which is meant the general work of philanthropy — than they have been in enterprises involving ritual or ecclesiastical organization, or improvements in the methods of worship.

The Unitarian leaders were committed, through and through, with few exceptions, to the anti-slavery reform. It had no more effective coadjutors than Dr. Channing, Theodore Parker, and Samuel J. May. In the earlier days of the temperance reform in New England, it relied upon their co-operation; and the names of John Pierpont, Joseph Allen, and Moses Grant are among the earlier temperance apostles of Massachusetts.

In the larger cities its ministers and lay members have taken very active part in the efforts for the organization of charity which are known under the general name of the "Associated Charities." And they are undoubtedly much more apt to bring into their pulpit subjects relating immediately to the improvement of society than are the preachers in other communions.

In saying this I do not speak from the one-sided view of a Unitarian minister; I speak after examining, with a good deal of care, with reference to this subject, the monthly numbers of the *Homiletic Review*, a journal admirably conducted in the interests of preachers, and which would be apt to show impartially the subjects of which the better preachers of the United States are generally addressing their congregations. Whoever will examine this journal will see that in ninety-eight cases out of a hundred the subjects chosen for discourse on Sunday are not subjects relating to the immediate improvement of morals or of the social order.

It would be fair to say, on the other hand, that in the Unitarian pulpit nine-tenths of the sermons preached have immediate reference to the improvement of the condition of the people who are addressed. Indeed, it has been said satirically, the Unitarian Church deals with the kingdom of man, or with the Kingdom of God, more than it does with the saving of individual souls. This is probably a reproach which its leading preachers would accept, and on which they would be willing to join issue if there were any tribunal before which the right or wrong of such a course could be discussed.

This is what the Liberal Church of to-day, what the Liberal communions stand for, — “glad tidings,” and not “sad tidings.” Glad tidings; the absolute and real coming of the Kingdom of God. This is their paramount office. It is in practice in our communities, what “differences” them from other communions. That is to say, the first work of a Liberal church, in any community, is to bring that religion up to the standard of the Kingdom of God. And a Liberal church has no right to be, there is no sort of use in establishing it, unless in the very “hardpan” of its foundations there is the determination of those who found it that it shall “level up” the place in which

it is, and bring it nearer to that standard of the Kingdom of God.

It has thus happened that the work of a genuine philanthropy, or what the Bible calls the bringing in of the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of the Son of Man, is attempted by the members of the Unitarian churches in lines wholly outside the specific work of their charity boards or of other strictly ecclesiastical organizations.

The present condition of the Unitarian Church, then, may be said to be that of a small body of people well satisfied that the religious convictions which they hold are those essential for the future life of this country. "A Unitarian church in any town means to you only one more name on your calendar," was the remark of an intelligent woman in a frontier town to a Unitarian missionary; "but to us it means more health, less sickness, more reading, less drinking, better music, higher society, and in general more life in this town than there was in it before."

That epigram of a bright woman states well enough what is the impression which the Unitarian leaders have with regard to the mission which they have in hand. That impression is not universal among the laity of their communion. Every Unitarian is, from the nature of the case, a free lance; and individuals are apt to spend their money and their zeal very much as they choose.

But the Unitarian Church undoubtedly regards itself as a sort of light corps, sent on in advance of the civilization of the world, to take the discomforts which always belong to heretics or fanatics, but to find, at the end of a generation, that the world has come up to the place where it was thirty years before, and to be on the lookout for new conquests.

It is impossible, as I have said, to print any creed and say that it represents the belief of all or of most Uni-

tarians. In a body numbering perhaps five hundred thousand people, and in some vital relation to other hundreds of thousands, every one of whom refuses to be bound by a formal confession, to make any such statement would be absurd. But in the statements which I have dropped by the way, as I have been trying to describe the position of this church, the intelligent reader will understand the drift of the movement in which the Unitarians are engaged.

It would be safe to say that no one of them regards Jesus Christ as the proper object of worship, in the modern use of that word. Unitarians worship God. They do not worship any son of God. They do not think that, in any fair use of words, the God of Heaven, the present Power who rules the universe to-day, walked from Capernaum to Jerusalem, or that, as Dr. Thompson says: "He walked about in Nazareth, interested in seeing the world which he had made." They regard all such language as belonging to a period before Galileo turned his tube upon the moons of Jupiter. Since it has been known that the earth is a mere speck in infinite space, they think it absurd to say that the Infinite Power, who rules all space, specialized himself in a house in Capernaum or in the temple at Jerusalem.

On the other hand, as I have said, all Unitarians belong to the Church of the Holy Spirit. They hold absolutely and practically that God is present with them, as He was present with Moses, as He was present with Isaiah, as He was present with Christ. They hold that He is as ready and as eager to lift this world up and to help His children in this world as he has been in any place or time. They believe that if they seek Him with all their hearts they will find Him. And the business of their worship is to bring people in accord in this claim for infinite power as the sons and daughters of the living God.

Thus they are at one with the best writers and thinkers of the Church in every line. We say that the Church has won all its victories when men have sought the life of God. We say that the life of God in the soul of man is the power by which this world is to be saved and set forward. We say that there is no good in Christianity unless in Christ a man's life is hid in God.

This is, for us, no expression of Sunday or of the creeds. It is the distinct consecration of all practical life. And we recognize a new discovery in railroad locomotion or a new method of electric lighting as belonging to the great series of gifts which a kind Father has bestowed upon children eager and willing to enter into His work and to subdue the world. We believe that the prime business of those children is to see that His will shall be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

In such faith we believe that each son of God, or each daughter of God, has his or her own personal affair with this Infinite Power which makes for righteousness. We do not believe it possible for any substituted being to take the consequences of a man's sin, or to turn over to him any fixed quota of blessedness. Salvation with us is not salvation from any particular bit of punishment; it is the elevation of a son of God into the infinite life. He is saved from ignorance, from disease, from sin, and from their consequences. It is not so much that he is made happy, as that he is made blessed in an intercourse with the Infinite Power which is the life not only of this world but of the universe.

Of course, then, the general view of Unitarians with regard to heaven and hell is wholly different from that which I have a right to call the mythical view of the darkest ages. Probably no Unitarian would say that heaven was in one place and that hell was in another place. On the other hand, all Unitarians would say that in propor-

tion as a man sins, he suffers the consequences of sin; in proportion as he throws away sin, he enters into the life of a real son of God.

It may or may not be convenient or wise to give to the varying conditions which thus result the names of heaven and hell. Those happen to be the names which were given to them formerly; it may or may not be wise to continue those names. But whatever the name is, it is the wish of the Unitarian Church to establish the Kingdom of Heaven as a reality in this world. It seeks in practice that God's Kingdom may come, and that His will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Of course there are pessimists and low-toned people among Unitarians as there are among other people. But speaking by-and-large, again I should say that on the whole the Unitarian Church is pleased with its position. Unitarians think they are succeeding, and they expect to succeed further. The average sermon in Evangelical pulpits of to-day in America is much such a sermon as was the average sermon in the Unitarian pulpit fifty years ago. With some exceptions, it is fair to say that the Unitarian Church of to-day would not stand most of the sermons which satisfied the Unitarian ancestors of the same hearers fifty years ago.

Just the same thing may be said of any Orthodox church in America. We must make exceptions of such fanatics as Father Ignatius, or other revivalists, who make it their business to bring in the theology of the dark ages and display it, as at the opera a man comes upon the stage in plate-armor which might have been worn by Richard or by Philip Augustus.

But, on the whole, stiff Calvinism is now regarded as an absurdity in every pulpit in America. On the whole, the Church of America believes, as the great Methodist Church believes, —

“ Salvation ’s free ;
It ’s free for you and me.”

On the whole the Church believes in character. On the whole the Church believes that every individual man has his own duty before God, and must approach God for himself. On the whole the Church does not believe in predestination or foreordination. If it rejects this, it has to reject the rest of the mediæval doctrines. So that, on the whole, the Unitarians feel that the protest of their fathers, and of the men who worked with their fathers, was by no means in vain.

Indeed, the constitutions of the United States and of the several States of America all rest on the presumption that men love the right and wish its advancement. That is to say, they rest on universal suffrage. Now no nation would trust its affairs to universal suffrage if it believed that men are the children of wrath, incapable of good, and led by the devil.

Again, all the American States insist on universal education. But if they believed that every one was born a child of wrath, they would not have placed the great advantages of intellectual education in their hands. That is to say, if we were surrounded by an army of devils, we should not place the best weapons at their disposal.

This is as much as to say that since the American people have been entrusted with the making of their own institutions, they have based those institutions on the postulate of the Unitarian Church, which is that all men and women are the children of God ; that they may partake of the divine nature ; and that, on the whole, their desire is to look upward and press forward.

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